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ABSTRACT

Restructuring of small school districts calls for power changes, including relationships: (1) between the community and the school; (2) among teachers, administrators, and students in the school; and (3) between teachers and students in the classroom. A trip to 25 small town school districts in 21 states revealed few instances of democracy, and many instances of unidirectional teaching, authoritarian leadership, and little community involvement. Small town schools provide a natural connection to their community. The community and schools can work together to solve problems with youth and to allow students to become more involved in the community. Site-based management is a strategy to decrease the hierarchical control and power of administrators. The majority of the 119 teachers interviewed on the trip wanted to be more involved with improving their teaching and the school. Of the 84 principals and assistant principals interviewed, 35 behaved democratically and 38 were categorized as authoritarian. Principals are urged to use the high commitment of their teachers to share school leadership. Changes need to occur in the classroom to allow democratic governance involving the students. With small classes and high social interaction, small town schools have an advantage in providing classrooms where authentic dialogue and involvement can occur. (KS)

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THE LESSONS OF SCHOOL RESTRUCTURING:

THE ADVANTAGE OF BEING A SMALL SCHOOL DISTRICT

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THE LESSONS OF SCHOOL RESTRUCTURING: THE ADVANTAGE OF BEING A SMALL SCHOOL DISTRICT

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In winter and spring of 1989 Dick Schmuck and I traveled 10,000 miles visiting 25 small town school districts in 21 states. We traveled along what Least Heat Moon called "the blue highways" of America; those small two lane roads that were marked blue by the cartographers pen. Our trip is reported in our 1992 book, Small Districts; Big Problems, and several other publications (Schmuck and Schmuck, 1990; 1991, 1992). We went in search of democracy in American schools; where citizens, students, faculty, staff, and administrators lay claim to their schools; where they have a voice in making decisions about school policy and practice, where they have a sense of belonging, and where they they are recognized and heard.

Findings: What did we find? Excepting for rare instances of teachers authentically interacting with students about the universal human experience, where principals engaged faculty in real dialogue about school policy and practice, and where superintendents fulfilled their role of leaders in the school and community, we found too few instances of democracy as a way of running small-town schools. Instead we found that small school districts mimicked the bureaucratic hierarchy and depersonalization of their urban counterparts. We found teachers engaged in unidirectional teaching, even when classes were very small. We found staff meetings of administrators and faculty where the administrator droned on, and staff behaved in ways that resembled an unruly high school class. We found citizens who

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attended sports and theatrical events at the school but who were held at a distance from school practice and felt alienated from their children's education. These are the problems that plague small districts, just as they plague urban and suburban districts in our country.

Restructuring: The Current Change Strategy to Improve Schooling in America: The current "buzzword" on change is "restructuring" (Elmore, 1980). Those of you who have been involved in schools over time have seen the "buzzwords" of change come and go. It seems we are always trying to change schools, as Larry Cuban points out in his article, "Reforming again, again, and again" (1990). Seymore Sarason, in his book The Predictable Failure of School Reform (1990), argues the key to effective reform is radical change in the power relationships among administrators, teachers, and students in the school and between teachers and students in the classroom. In my thirty years in education, I see the call for "restructuring" comes closest, perhaps, to realizing the principles of democracy in schools. While there are many definitions of restructuring, I offer three criteria.

First, restructured schools call for change from the bottom up involving all the natural participants in schooling: students, faculty and community. Second, restructured schools have shared governance between teachers and administrators in conducting schooling to best guarantee student success. Third, there is authentic dialogue between teachers and students and classrooms are microcosms of democracy; students are not mere clients but active participants in the school. All these criteria focus on reducing hierarchy, decreasing distance between role takers, and having a shared sense of community. Restructured schools teach and live the principles of democracy.

How Are Small Town Schools Advantaged: I will discuss these three criteria: 1) relationships between the school and community, 2) relationships between

teachers and administrators and students in running the school, and 3) relationships between teachers and students in the classroom, to show how small town schools are advantaged in creating restructured schools.

School and Community: Small town schools have a natural connection to their community that is enviable to urban and suburban educators. In small towns everyone knows where the school is, and most people have a connection to the school even if they don't have children. We use the metaphor of small town schools as the eddy of a river, pulling everything into its tenacious grasp. Schools are the centerpiece of small town life. Indeed, this intimate connection between the schools and community may be bittersweet; people give up their privacy, especially educators, and everybody knows everybody else, and their business. In the towns we visited there was an unusual commitment to place and belonging that we don't find in urban places. People want to be where they are. Despite the fact that many students know they will have to leave their relatively sheltered environment to make their way in the larger world, there is a strong feeling of connection to place. As one black teacher in one of the poorest districts we visited in the south said, "I have been offered jobs in many places, but this is where I belong, I have a sense they need me here".

A purpose of restructured schools is to build a community of commitment, a sense of connection and belonging. This is very difficult to achieve in urban and suburban centers where schools compete with other institutions and where individuals are disconnected from each other. There is, in fact, a movement called "communitarianism", inspired by Anatol Etzioni, and written about in the book, The Good Society, by Bellah et al (1991). Communitarianism is a movement to connect people to their communities and to each other. This is what small town schools have naturally; this is their advantage. They already have the basic human connections between their schools and their community.

For instance, in one small town blown by the winds from the mountains, the business community was concerned about vandalism in the downtown, especially with so many stores being boarded up and empty. Members of the remaining business community called the school principal and asked that he "control those high school kids". The principal called a community meeting, raised the issue, and made it clear it was not a high school problem, but a community problem. Kids had no place to meet, the already despairing looking downtown seemed to ask for more vandalism, and students felt disconnected and alienated from their town. When we visited plans were in progress to involve students in sprucing up the despairing looking downtown, and to place students as interns in the town's businesses. How about establishing regular student placements in the businesses of the town? How about convening a group of students to address the crumbling economy of many small towns? How about students participating in the city council and certainly on the school board?

Democratic Governance: Site based managment, organizational development and total quality management are management strategies to decrease the hierarchical control and power of administrators. These are not new concepts, they are based on the principles of democracy. Mary Parker Follett, as early as1941, in reaction to the increasing factorizing of organizations, offered the radical idea that people who are involved in implementing a decision, should be involved in making the decision.

The 119 teachers we interviewed wanted to be connected to each other to improve instruction and the school yet, in most part, there were few mechanisms in place for them to work together in formal ways to improve their teaching or to improve the school. Teachers operated autonomously, and even distantly from each other. Most teachers we talked with wanted to be involved in talking about school practices; they saw ways to improve school functioning that would aid student

progress. But more often than not, their attempts to influence school practice were rebuffed.

Of the 84 principals and assistant principals we observed and interviewed, we categorized 35 as behaving democractically; elementary principals were more often democratic than high school principals; and 9 out of the 10 women administrators in our sample were democratic. What is democratic leadership? It involves people who must implement decisions in making those decisions. For instance, in some schools a leadership team had been developed that met regularly with the principal to establish school policies and procedures; each member of the leadership team served as a communication link to the faculty they represented.

38 of the principals we categorized as "authoritarian". These principals retained all power in making school decisions and informed the staff about their decisions. They decided; teachers implemented. When we asked teachers about what voice they had in their school, one teacher said, "What voice do we have? Ha! None. We have a dictatorship in this school. This principal is just like my dad; that's the age they learned this stuff. If you don't like the captain, get on a different ship". We surmized these principals, all of them male, and all of whom had been coaches, conceived of communication and teamwork as unidirectional and heirarchical, as a kind of military establishment, rather than seeing leadership as transactional and equalitarian.

Small town schools have an advantage for involving teachers in decisions which affect them. There is little turn over, there is high commitment, there are many years of experience, and teachers care deeply about student progress. Although too many administrators try to make a depersonalized factory out of their schools, the informal fabric of the school calls for close personal relationships among teachers and among students. We urge principals in small town schools to use their natural advantage. How about developing a leadership team? How about

faculty running faculty meetings and use the time for real dialogue about school issues rather than a podium for a principals diatribe? How about sharing leadership with people who have the skills and commitment to do so? Whether it be called site based management, total quality management, organizational development or participatory decision making, we found that teachers, students, and citizens were ready to share the responsibilities of school governance.

Students as Democratic Citizens: As teachers do not experience democratic governance in their adult life in schools, neither do they provide democratic governance in the classroom. I think this is no coincidence; teachers who are actively encouraged to participate in school governance, have students who participate in classroom governance. Despite the fact that teachers often have small classes, where students know each other in and out of school, and where the peer group is an established part of the social fabric of the school, teachers tend to lecture, do not use the naturally occuring social exchanges of students to facilitate learning, and maintain hierarchical control in the classroom. Although we found some exceptionally good teachers, generally we did not see the classroom as the "microcosm of a democratic society", as John Dewey urged.

We had asked principals to show us classrooms where teachers organized students in groups. Most often, especially in the elementary schools, we were taken to classrooms where ability grouping prevailed in math and reading. Out of 119 teachers we interviewed, only 20 had heard the term "cooperative learning". Indeed, in one classroom, the teacher apologized for her small buzzgroups of 5th graders who were working on spelling, she explained, "this is my last resort -- they just don't get their spelling done without working with each other." With small classes and high social interaction, small town schools have an advantage in providing classrooms where authentic dialogue and involvement can occur.

Furthermore, when we inquired about student governance in the high school,

student councils were but a perfunctory organization planning no more than the high school prom. Small towns have an advantage to involve students not only in the governance of the school but to participate actively in the community. Paul Nachtigal argues more strongly, he argues that students should be involved citizens in restoring and rebuilding the economic base of small towns (1982, 1992).

Conclusion: The word today is restructuring; this calls for a changed power relationships between the community and the school; among teachers, administrators and students in the school; and between teachers and students in the classroom. The goals of education can be met when all are empowered to influence the policies and practices of education, as Mary Parker Follett and John Dewey taught us so many years ago. Small town schools have an advantage in bringing about such democratic relationships.

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